

Unity as a Prerequisite for a Christian Mission: A Missional Reading of Rom 15:1-12

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Abstract *This article seeks to show that it is ecclesialogically useful to read Romans primarily as a mission-strategic document. The understanding of Paul's global mission helps us recognise how, in the paraenesis of the epistle, Paul's call to unity connects to the pastoral problem of ethnic division among Roman Christians. Unity, it seems, is understood by Paul to be the prerequisite for the success of his world mission. This kind of unity could be equally as important for the Christian witness in a postmodern global village.*

Introduction

The paraenesis of Romans has been a headache for New Testament scholars. The tone of Rom 12-15 is at times extremely general – which fits well with theories of those scholars who view the letter as a doctrinal exposition of a systematic type. On the other hand, it contains passages (e.g. Rom 13:1-7; 14:1-12) which seem specific and situational – as if Paul knew this church which he had, according to his own admission, never visited. How can this be reconciled?

It is the thesis of this paper that the writing of Romans was motivated by the concrete problem in Rome – the division of the church according to nationality. This problem is not specific to the Rome of Paul's time. Nevertheless, Paul does not write generally – as is more the case in Eph 1¹ – as if this were a principle of Christian conduct. On the contrary, Paul's insistence on unity is missiological in character. If this is true, then Paul writes to the Romans to call them to accept each other

¹ There the author is concerned with the 'cosmic' extents of salvation, of which unity is fundamental (*New Bible Commentary*, Leicester: IVP, 1994, 1230).

because the disunity of the church would negatively influence his own universal mission plans. In this way, Paul's plea to the Romans becomes a fruitful principle for today's global church and a challenge for contemporary Christian witness.

This discussion is divided into two sections. In the first we will deal with Paul as the "apostle to the Gentiles," (ἑθνῶν ἀπόστολος, 11:13) and the scope of his mission to show that Romans portrays Paul as missiologically and territorially "universally aware."² This universal missionary awareness impinges substantially, I believe, on the framework and occasion for the writing of Romans. In the second part we shall have a closer look at the text of Rom 15:1-12, and see – in accordance with the subject of this symposium³ – how the unity of the Roman churches is forced on us as a key subject in the letter, and also that the call to unity, immersed in Paul's apocalyptic expectation, is fundamentally tied to the success of his global Christian mission.

A. Paul the Apostle to 'the Gentiles' in Romans

"Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle" – this is how the writer of the Letter to the Romans introduces himself to the Christians in Rome. Paul had not visited Rome prior to that letter so he did not know the church in Rome – or we should better refer to the churches in Rome, as according to reconstructions by P. Minear and P. Lampe there were probably a dozen of them. He was not their apostle in the sense that he founded this church by his own preaching of the gospel to them. Paul certainly always wanted to preach in Rome (Rom 1:10; Acts 19:21). But his work in the other regions of Greece and Asia Minor had prevented the realization of this plan.⁴

Such circumstances pose the practical question: Why would Paul decide to write a letter to an unknown church when all his other letters emerged from his missionary endeavour and need, i.e. they were motivated by the situation in Paul's mission stations? And why would he write a letter as complex theologically and as demanding in content to an unknown church? These questions underline, in particular, the problem of the paraenesis of Romans. If the audience is not known to Paul, can he know and address their pastoral problem? On the other

² We could call Paul's missionary conscience even 'global' – as without the distortions of the Medieval Christian geography it is not completely excluded that the people of the ancient world employed the idea that the world was a sphere, but they knew only the Mediterranean as their 'world' while they thought of the other parts of the sphere as too cold or too hot to live in.

³ This article was presented at the Biblijski Institut Symposium on Christian Unity in Zagreb, Feb. 9, 2008

⁴ Rainer Riesner, *Die Frühzeit des Apostels Paulus* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebek, 1994), 318.

hand, if he knows their situation – i.e. because of the report of his many Roman friends whom he met elsewhere in the Empire – where does the authority to address them come from, since he is not their apostle?

In this part of the paper I seek to show that there are reasons why Romans should be understood primarily as a display of Paul's universal missionary strategy. This would naturally mean that in principle, Romans is no different from Paul's other letters – it is connected with Paul's missionary effort. It differs only in the scope of interest – the problem being addressed would not have only local implications, but global as well.

To explain our thesis we shall first expose some older and newer approaches, which claim – sometimes only in passing – that Paul's mission in Romans is displayed as 'universal.' We shall also show how theories of territorialism could be used to better understand the letter as a whole, as every mission strategy has to be considered as a 'territorial' strategy. Mainly this will help us to see how the theological and practical parts of the letter are reciprocally dependent on each other. This will lead us to the conclusion that Romans should be read as a missionary document.

Orbis mundi as the Realm of Paul's Missionary Outreach

Pauline theology of our time knows two creative proposals on how to understand Rom 15:19, which are not as independent from one another as it may seem at first glance:

ὥστε με ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλὴμ καὶ κύκλῳ μέχρι τοῦ Ἰλλυρικοῦ
ἐπληρώκεναι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ.

The older proposal is John Knox's suggestion made in 1960, showing he is probably the first to understand κύκλῳ geographically as *orbis mundi*.⁵ Unfortunately, Knox only proposed this as his creative hypothesis and did not even attempt to prove it, which has resulted in many quotations, but generally as an example of methodological shortcoming. According to Knox, Paul in writing Rom 15:19 has a mission in mind which would encompass the whole world cycle. It started already in Jerusalem and he intends to end it there. By 56 C.E. when he probably writes Romans from Corinth, he has already "finished" one part of the cycle – the half from Jerusalem to Illyricus. Now he needs to cross over to Rome and finish the cycle by reaching Spain. According to Knox, Paul might even be thinking that the cycle is finished in Spain as this country was considered *finis terrae* at the time.⁶ Knox's

⁵ "Romans 15:14-33 and Paul's Conception of his Mission" in *JBL* 83 (1964) 1-11.

⁶ This is probably so because only the Western end of the world was reachable – the East, South and North were impossible to reach in Paul's time.

thesis was particularly difficult for such interpreters who took Luke's account in Acts to be historically accurate. It seems that Luke sees Paul as an apostle only after his sending from Antioch and the goal of his mission in Acts being Rome.

In the meantime Knox's thesis could be defended, at least in part by the encyclopaedic work of Martin Hengel and Anna-Maria Schwemer: *Paulus zwischen Damaskus und Antiochien: Die unbekannten Jahre des Apostels Paulus*,⁷ though this book insists on the historicity of Acts. Hengel and Schwemer insist that one should consider Paul as a missionary of Christ and an apostle right from the beginning, i.e. from his call at Damascus. They draw attention to the fact that Paul is driven from the Arabic desert and all the way to Damascus by a Nabatean high officer, who had no formal authority there, but was aided by the large Nabatean community in the city. Such persecution can hardly be imagined as a reaction to Paul's hermit experiences where he was receiving private religious visions by Christ and re-evaluating his theology, as was held by tradition. On the contrary, as can be read in Gal 4, Hengel and Schwemer consider that Paul must have preached forcefully even then and there. Such preaching resulted in fierce disputes among people which usually ended with the politicians, as was later the case in Asia Minor and Greece (cf. Acts 18:12ff).

According to this thesis, Paul would have been first an apostle to the Shemites – to Jews – but also to their first neighbors and brothers through a joint forefather. In Arabia, then, we would already see his call to preach where the Gospel had not yet been preached (cf. Rom 15:20). A return to Jerusalem after his call would not be meaningful, as there could hardly be any missionary objectives found any more. Acts testifies that at an early period Jerusalem was “full of the gospel” (Acts 5:28). It is also conceivable that the way to the East had its evangelists, as the Jews had many (and often unfortunate) links to Babylon. This may also be a reason why Paul turns to the West while the orthodox Jews did not tend to that side. If we view it from this perspective, Paul's mission must be considered broader than Japhetites, to which he seems confined by Luke, and it starts a lot earlier than Antioch. Would it not be possible, then, to consider that Paul is thinking globally when it comes to his mission, and even considers evangelizing the Hamites?

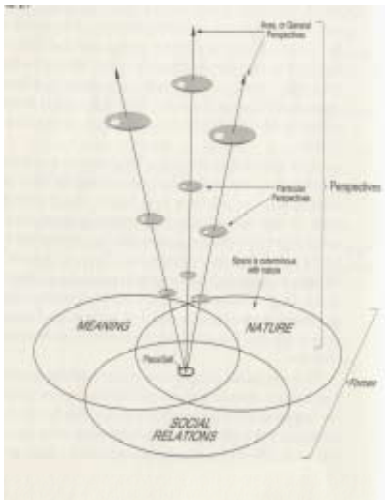
J. Scott would agree with this suggestion, but he would object to Knox's presupposition that Paul's global missionary strategy was laid out according to a Roman territorialism⁸ (which was generally presupposed by scholars of Knox's time). Instead, Scott attempts to show that Paul's missionary plans function according to a stubborn Jewish territorialism – one which was used by all the biblical writers and rabbinic schools but also by Christian church fathers all the way to

⁷ Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1998.

⁸ *Paul and the Nations* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1996).

the 15th century – the territory of the Table of Nations from Gen 10. In this territory, Jerusalem is the “navel of the world” – as *LXX* interprets Ez 38:12 – and it is surrounded by the territories of Ham (Africa), Shem (Asia), and Japhet (Europe). So Paul truly does think of a world cycle, but this cycle is, according to Scott, tied to the Table of Nations and particularly to the specific nations quoted. This is precisely why Paul can claim to have “fulfilled” the Gospel, as he had evangelized all the nations mentioned in the Table of Nations.

Scott’s theory can be criticized in more ways, but I believe the most fundamental to be the one from the theory of space. Territorialism itself is a very complex term, determined primarily by fluidity because of the forces which are reciprocally active in territories. These forces belong to diverse realms: to the realm of social relations, the realm of thought trains, but also to the realm of natural data which determine a place (by which “natural” may also include such elements which are not completely “natural” but have been created by humans). All these forces together, and by influencing each other, form the place of a person and thus influence a person. But reciprocally, a human being, from the youngest age, influences the place and the forces active in the place. This is primarily why the Table of Nations – regardless of the fact that it is a popular geographical tradition – cannot be considered a “territory”, but only one part in the territory of a person – in our case, that of the Apostle Paul. This means that if we want to argue geographically, we should determine which territory is basic to him – Jewish or Roman?



In *Homo Geographicus: A framework for Action, Awareness and Social Concern*,⁹ R. Sack has attempted to point out the relationships within a territory in a paradigm.¹⁰

He claims that all the forces are being assembled and assimilated - i.e. evaluated according to their usefulness for this place - in the actual geographical place itself. This is how the place influences a person, but this is also how a person via re-evaluation of the tradition (“meaning” in the paradigm), of social relations and natural circumstances changes his or her place.

If we are to apply this paradigm to Paul, this will mean that some of the more popu-

⁹ Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins, 1997.

¹⁰ Sack, *Homo Geographicus*, 28.

lar and newer discussions about his missionary strategy should be abandoned. First, it could not be said for Paul that he is “Jerusalem-centered” as has become popular from many different and sometimes even opposed theological camps, particularly in the period after the Holocaust. Paul, a Tarsan, could have had the broad Roman Empire as his territorial center, regardless of his schooling in Jerusalem and his strict religious observance. This was instinctively noticed by the earlier writers. That is why, for him, Jerusalem does not have a geographical, but rather a theological meaning. This is also why Paul can show the Galatians that Jerusalem, as a geographical place, has no particularly important meaning for him, and this is why Paul is not calling anyone on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (as one would expect in an aliyah).¹¹

On the other hand, Paul’s territory would caution us from believing that by being centered in a Roman place Paul could not have been a sincere Jew nor a man of great love for his people. He does not even have to be a severe critic of Judaism as has been proposed by the History of Religion School. On the contrary, Paul re-evaluates traditions with which he grew up in light of his place and finds that some of the basic Jewish traditions do not remain standing, while the Jewish Scripture is always and in everything relevant for the requests of his broad place.

Finally, Christ’s call extended to Paul to be the “apostle to the nations” can be considered a trigger for his ministry, but not an exclusive reason which forces him to go to unknown regions. According to tradition, the other apostles also obtained the call to be apostles to the nations (comp. Mt 28:19-20), but contrary to Paul they obeyed it only reluctantly and evangelized mainly just one nation – their own. Sack’s paradigm and the mere fact of Paul’s origin in the Diaspora may help us to notice why it was so much easier for him to accept Christ’s call, contrary to the expectations that God should have to instruct Paul, the devout Pharisee, much more intensely to win him for a universal mission.

If it stands – as both Knox and Scott have claimed – that the ‘circle’ in Rom 15:19 stands for the mission of a universal scope, we should be reading Romans as a missionary document, i.e. as Paul’s territorial strategy for the evangelization of the world. Today almost everybody believes that Romans can be read like that – although many would maintain that the global mission is only a sub-subject in Romans.¹² For our purpose, even such a partial thesis is enough. In the next part I will show that the re-evaluation of the doctrine in Romans is best understood as a necessity for Paul’s missionary plans.

¹¹ Compare S. Motyer “Paul and Pilgrimage” in C. Bartholomew and F. Hughes eds. *Exploration in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 50-72.

¹² E.g. J. Dunn, *Romans* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), lv.

Doctrinal Questions – Questions About the Unity in Rome

Elsewhere I have shown how a re-evaluation of individual doctrines in Romans would work with regards to Sack's paradigm.¹³ Here I would like to lead us through parts of the letter pointing to the missionary character of all its parts.

First, the starting point of all Paul's doctrinal discussions in Romans is the broad Roman place as the place of their departure. Paul starts the letter with a proof of the universal sinful nature of people (1:18-3:20). Everybody is sinful, Jews included. This discussion "from nature" is not a proof that the Jews are more sinful than other people, and that is why they lost God's favor. On the contrary, Paul wants to show that belonging to the chosen nation is no guarantee against sin, and that the nature of people in the place where Paul lives – the Roman Empire – of Jews and non-Jews alike, is sinful. Thus, in Sackian terms, one could call the introductory discussion in Romans "Paul's discussion from the realm of nature." This should warn us at the mere beginning that the occasion for writing is not doctrine, but the need of the entire sinful world population. This need is the reason for Paul's mission.

The longest discussion in Romans is the one on popular theological traditions, and enormous amounts of literature have been written about it. In Sackian terms, we could speak of a "discussion from meaning" – i.e. Paul is interested in testing whether the traditions as he learned them apply to the place of his standing (i.e. the Roman world) or not. We should, therefore, not only be interested in the question of how Paul redefines some of the traditions, but also why he redefines these traditions and not others, i.e. Why does he refer us to Abraham and Adam? Why does he deal with the law? And not least, why does he end it all with adoption as sons?

Coming from a Sackian paradigm, it seems to me that Paul chose these doctrines because they are pivotal to the disunity of Jews and non-Jews in the church: Abraham was displayed as an archetype man who is faithful to the law; Adam was an archetype for the sinful Gentiles. The law was considered holy and saving, and the adoption of the Jews as God's sons made them exceptional among the nations, which also divided them from all other people. All these subjects can be conceived as problematic in a situation which might have been burdened by synagogue disputes of the kind we encounter in Acts in Asia Minor. On the other hand, it is quite possible that in Rome in the fifties these subjects were even enforced by Claudius' edict – i.e. by the exile of the Jews from Rome and the return of the Jewish Christian leaders to Roman churches after Caesar's death. These were now separated from the synagogues and had new leaders – possibly

¹³ *Paul's Territoriality and Mission Strategy with Particular Reference to Romans* (London: LST, Doctoral Thesis) 142-180.

Christians from a Gentile background. So one could perceive that the problem in Rome was not only with the Jews and their traditions, but also with the Gentiles, who fought for their positions in the community. Romans 11, in particular, shows that Paul redefines their doctrine that God rejected the Jews and has made the Gentile Christians into a new Israel. So while the Jews defend themselves with traditions about the steadfastness of the law and election, the Jewish tradition about the adoption as sons of God obtained a counter-tradition with the Gentiles, which is quite evident even in Acts: God has rejected Israel and has elected the Gentiles! (Compare Acts 13:50; 18:6; 28:28). Thus it can be claimed that Paul's thought in the whole of the doctrinal section deals with salvation through Christ which does not come through the body and by works of the law, but by mercy. But this has positive outcomes for the Jews as well – for if salvation comes by mercy, then not only the Gentiles are being saved, but salvation is warranted also for the Jews. Even their “hardening” cannot thwart God's mercy. He wants to show mercy to all! This is also how Paul concludes his discussion in Rom 11.

This is why the paraenesis of Romans, as a call to unity and acceptance of each other – the sacrifice of oneself for the benefit of the other, is not coincidental or even interpolated! It points to the fact that Paul's occasion for writing Romans is to be sought in the universal missionary strategy, in the mission of the world in which Jews and Gentiles live together before God – because this is established as such by God and confirmed in the Scriptures (Rom 3-11), and has to be evident in the life of the church (12-16) so that the mission can be effective.

ἔθνη *“Nations” or “Gentiles”?*

Such a discussion can be had only if something drastically changes in our view of the Apostle Paul. We have learned, even if we want to distance ourselves from the historical-critical German liberal theology which has invented him, that Paul is first of all “an apostle to the Gentiles!” We must only read our New Testament translations and we will recognize how entrenched this notion is in our minds. Paul's theology, we believe, is diametrically opposed to the Jewish salvation by works of the law. And while we would not necessarily claim that Paul is the inventor of a new religion, as was the case with some of the old Tübingen scholars, we would surely agree that Judaism and Christianity have only the Old Testament Bible in common.

But we need to question if this may also be a New Testament understanding, and in particular, would Paul agree with this? It is certainly true that occasionally Paul calls himself ἔθνῶν ἀπόστολος (Rom 11:13), but I suggest that a closer look at this term is needed as well.

However, what is basic to it and already clear is that even in the LXX ἔθνος/ἔθνη does not carry a pejorative meaning, which means in most cases it would

not be translated as “Gentiles” but as “nations.”¹⁴ It also seems to me that, even more importantly, we should think about what kind of understanding Paul would have expected from his readers in Rome, as the majority of them should be considered Gentiles. Have they too heard ἔθνη as “Gentiles” or more probably as “nations”? As today it is commonly accepted that Paul is writing to a mixed group in Rome, a Jewish racial distinction would not be Paul’s primary choice. It is much more plausible to believe that he uses the term neutrally and universally, i.e. in most cases it should include the Jews.

A Missiological Framework for the Understanding of Romans

We should therefore conclude that there are many reasons why missions is not just one of several occasions for the writing of Romans, as we see Dunn admit, but that it is much more probable that the letter as a whole was motivated by the need for a global mission which was threatened by tendencies of disunity and division according to nationality. The apostle deals with disputable doctrines, insisting on the unity which has been given in Christ to all the nations – regardless of the cultural distinctions which, on their own, even Paul can affirm. Christ is the one ruler of the world and Christians testify to it by their unity.

This call to unity has practical implications which are at the heart of Paul’s writing to the Romans, as is evident from Rom 15. Paul does not write something new to them (on the contrary, he expects that he has not written anything new and that these are things they could teach each other! 15:14-15). His writing is closely linked to his ministry to the ends of the world (15, 16-24) and to his expectation that the Romans, united around Christ, the ruler of this orbis mundi will equip him and send him off on the way to the West (15,24). But before he lays out these plans and requests to them, Paul encourages the Romans to live in unity, which he concludes with a catena of Bible quotations about the glory of God proclaimed by the unity of all nations. In our passage (Rom 15:1-12), Paul actually concludes the teaching of his letter. To this passage we shall now turn.

B. Rom 15:1-12 from the Perspective of Paul’s Mission

The text can be divided into three parts: 1. A call to the strong to bear the weaknesses of the weak (15:1-2); 2. The example of Christ who pleased others and not himself, and how to follow him in this (15:3-8); 3. A scriptural catena about the unity of nations in the praises offered to God (15:9-12). Following this call to the strong to bear the weaknesses of the weak so that God could be praised in the

¹⁴ Scott, *Paul and the Nations*, 27-61.

world, Paul explains his missionary calling and plans to evangelize Spain. The passage preceding our text is devoted to the acceptance of those who have different beliefs on issues like food and the observance of holidays – which reminds us, as we have claimed already, that in Romans we are dealing with issues of conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Interestingly, Paul does not side with any fraction. Although it might look, at first, like he counts himself among the strong who can eat anything, it is clear that this passage is not just for the strong in this narrow sense. It is addressed to everybody. Here we cannot know who are the strong and who are the weak – i.e. they cannot be determined by what they eat.

The Call to “Us, the Strong”

Rather, Paul’s initial call in this passage is a trap similar to those which can be found elsewhere in Romans.¹⁵ Paul knits a net around his readers, so they would be caught in it. “We, the strong, we have to bear with the weaknesses of the weak and should not please ourselves.” This is a warning and a way in one. First, if you set yourself up as a judge of doctrine and practice in the church – if you know better than others and if you have more insight than they do, you are still not given the right to correct others, separate from them or teach them from above. On the contrary, Paul insists on something which is unpopular with humans. As a Christian, you cannot please yourself, but you have to please your neighbor. Those who are “strong” must be servants so that there can be the building up of one another and so that the good can be spread out.

Seemingly, Paul sees himself among the “strong” – and rightly so, as he too has taken the liberty to teach them doctrine and to know better – but the tone of his letter is careful and reconciliatory in all places.¹⁶ He does not underestimate them and does not lecture them, at least never on purpose. He may sometimes slip into a tone which was reserved for “his own” churches, but he takes it back immediately, raising the Romans’ dignity.

Thus Paul gives an interesting lesson to everybody involved in fights in Rome – regardless of the nature of these fights: whether they were for positions or over doctrines (which for most part is only a good disguise for the urge to rule and isolate others who think differently). In Greek, Paul builds suspense by delaying the verb till the last possible position in the sentence: we the strong the

¹⁵ E.g. Dunn points to the ‘Nathan effect’ which can be seen in the Catalogue of Vices in Rom 1:18ff – Paul mentions sins which everybody condemns only to tell them in the end – if you agreed with me that these things are sinful you have condemned yourselves.

¹⁶ E.g. 1:11 “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong” Paul takes back from this statement immediately in 1:12 “that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged.”

weaknesses of the weak have to... forcing them to fill in their own options: Judge? Reject? Exclude? But certainly not “bear” which is, in the end, Paul’s option. He lures his readers to identify themselves with “us who are strong,” but thus he had put them in a place where they definitely did not want to be – that namely, now they must bear the weak.

Accept One Another

Although this bearing of weaknesses is difficult and seemingly illogical, it is nothing new and extraordinary for Christians. Christ did not please himself – but “he was crushed for our iniquities.” Although in Romans 15, Paul quotes Ps 69:3, the songs about Isaiah’s Servant of God resound here: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God” (53:4).

As unrealistic as Paul’s instruction may seem, still it is possible – Scriptures attest that this is the right way to go and that those who step in it and train themselves in endurance by bearing the burden of others will not stay unredeemed. Scriptures have a word of comfort for them: Christ’s suffering was not in vain. In the same way, they, who are strong and bear the weaknesses of the weak can have hope that God rules in their circumstances. He gives patience and comfort – and bestows unity in thought and imitation of Christ. And the God of our Lord Jesus Christ is glorified!

This is why we have to accept each other – as Christ too has accepted us into his glory, us who were sinners. And this is exactly the sentence with which Paul started this discussion about unity in Rom 14: Accept each other as Christ has accepted you.

The Outcome of Unity

Rom 15:8 is considered one of the many discontinuities of thought in this letter. It is interesting how many ellipses can be found in a text which is otherwise considered carefully constructed.

Accept each other as Christ accepted you is the forgoing thought. Now Paul continues it with λέγω γάρ: I tell you, therefore. What follows, as one can find often in Greek after verbs of speech, is an Infinitive construction with Accusative (AcI) Χριστὸν διάκονον γεγενῆσθαι περιτομῆς – “that Christ is a servant to the circumcised” (i.e. to the Jews) – and then two adverbial phrases are added to this which can be seen as grammatically dependent on γεγενῆσθαι – which is a perfect form indicating that Christ became and stayed a servant to circumcision, on the one hand to affirm God’s truthfulness and on the other to fulfill the promises given to the Fathers. All translations agree so far.

However, the beginning of verse 9 is rarely seen as dependent on λέγω γάρ

and interpreters usually decide on a grammatically illogical connection to the accusative construction of Χριστὸν διάκονον γεγενῆσθαι (“Christ is a servant”). So, for instance, Dunn writes: “For I declare that Christ has become servant to the circumcised for the sake of God’s truth... and the Gentiles to give praise to God for his mercy.”

There are at least four reasons why such a common translation should be re-evaluated. There are three grammatical issues and the already mentioned problem of the translation of ἔθνη.

Accordingly, one must notice first that the phrase τὰ δὲ ἔθνη ὑπὲρ ἐλέους δοξάσαι τὸν θεόν is also an accusative construction, although there are people who would like to translate τὰ ἔθνη as a nominative. But this would imply that Paul has confused his tenses and used the Aorist Infinitive while he actually meant 3rd person plural Future Indicative Active! If, however, we are to understand the text as it stands, then we should read Rom 15:9a also as dependent on λέγω γάρ and parallel to and not dependent on the Χριστὸν διάκονον γεγενῆσθαι περιτομῆς phrase.

This rendering is supported by other minor grammatical indicators, one of which is the particle δέ, which expands the thought. In our case, we could translate: “On the one hand I tell you that Christ has become a servant to the circumcised because of God’s truth... on the other however that the nations praise God because of mercy.” Grammatically, it would be like this:

8λέγω γάρ

Χριστὸν διάκονον γεγενῆσθαι περιτομῆς

ὑπὲρ ἀληθείας θεοῦ,

εἰς τὸ βεβαιῶσαι τὰς ἐπαγγελίας τῶν πατέρων,

9τὰ δὲ ἔθνη ὑπὲρ ἐλέους δοξάσαι τὸν θεόν.

Once we have posed it like this, all the red flags of our “liberal” minds start waving – but it is the Gentiles who praise God because of mercy! Is not ἔθνη a contrast to περιτομῆς in 15:8?

We have already pointed out the tendency to render τὰ ἔθνη as “Gentiles” instead of neutrally translating it as “nations” so I shall not repeat that here. Rather, we should claim that there is no reason here to use the pejorative translation. This is confirmed by another grammatical point. Rom 15:9b starts with καθώς, an adverb which warns us that the Old Testament catena which follows is dependent on what has been said in 9a. If the catena addresses unity of all nations and the fact that all the “nations” praise God because of his mercy, that necessarily means that ἔθνη must be inclusive of all the nations already found in verse 9a.

But the logic of the context also points to the fact that Paul had to include all the nations – even Jews – as Paul knows only one way in which a human being can stand before a holy God – and that is because of mercy. The whole section in Rom 15:9c-12 points to such an understanding. It may not be immediately evident from the first occurrence of ἔθνη in this catena, as this one is ambiguous and could mean both. But starting in 15:10 it is quite clear that all the nations – including God’s chosen people – praise God together. Interestingly, even the famous distinction and much trusted distinction between ἔθνος and λαός is dropped in 15:11. And finally, should the “root of Jesse” not be considered to rule also over Israel?

It seems to me, then, that we have sufficiently shown what Paul may think about the unity of all people, and their common task being to praise God in one accord and in this to proclaim his glory and his authority. As this catena is the conclusion to Paul’s theological exposition, one should also consider it as vitally important in determining the occasion for the writing of Romans. Paul writes because disunity would threaten his global mission. Thus unity is the only Scriptural and pragmatic solution for a successful global mission.

Paul does not think that unity is easy to accomplish. To please others is among the most difficult of tasks. It is much easier to be in the right all the time, to make enemies of the whole world, and not to leave it to God to judge brothers and sisters. But Paul believed that his universal mission depended on whether Christians in Rome would succeed in overcoming disunity and strife for position, and in recognizing Christ as their Lord.

Conclusion

In some ways, it may be claimed that it was Paul who, by his apostolic call and vision, brought the Judeo-Christian world to the edge of a crisis: Will those who have considered themselves God’s chosen people be able to accept the Gentiles who God has now clearly allowed entrance to his Kingdom, or will they not? But the issue turned almost instantly and the new Gentile majority in Roman churches shows us that they too did not understand the essence of the Gospel which is for all the peoples – including the Jews. It is not evident what the outcome in Rome was or whether the Roman Christians – Jews and Gentiles – ever learned to praise God in unity. However, there is hardly space for much optimism given the century-long history of anti-semitism. Roman Christians may not have thought much of Paul’s instruction. Therefore the Christian church has to come to terms with a series of injustices which she inflicted on the Jews. Equally, however, in the West today and particularly among Evangelicals, the popular romantic Semitism has equal potential for injustice, particularly towards Christians in

Palestine, who, as a minority among minorities live through the hardest of days. Romans is a reminder to us that Christ does not call people because of their nationality, but regardless of it.

Also, we tend to dispute over ecumenism – over the attempts of one side to rule over all, and over the phobias of the others that someone might force them into unity with people of whose doctrines they do not approve. Both positions are not worthy of Christ's church. From what we have seen, Paul did not intend to go and unite the churches in Rome organizationally. According to Paul, the church is not an organization in the first place (although, admittedly, organization helps life on some levels), but the church lives her loyalty to Christ, who is her head, and who brings the church together as one body, even when we do not see or do not wish to see it.

If there is anything to take away from Rom 15:1-12 it is the call that if we feel we are strong – full of truth and true knowledge so that we can lecture others – then it is our task to bear the weaknesses of the weak. Like Christ, we are to live the truth in love, and like him, we are to be ready to sacrifice ourselves for others. In this sense, a Christ-like church can show the world this Christ who reigns over the nations and in whom the nations trust. Such celebration in love can be truthfully evangelistic in our contemporary global village, as Paul expected it to be in the world of his time.

Sažetak *Kroz ovaj članak se želi pokazati zašto bi ekleziološki bilo korisno čitati Rimljanima poslanicu prvenstveno kao misijsko-strateški dokument. Razumijevanje Pavlove globalne misijske namjere pomaže prepoznati kako se poticaj na jedinstvo u parenezi poslanice usko povezuje kako s doktrinarnim temama poslanice tako i s pastoralnim problemom podijeljenosti po nacionalnosti među rimskim kršćanima. Jedinstvo, čini se, Pavao smatra uvjetom za uspješnost svoje svjetske misije. Takvo jedinstvo moglo bi biti jednako važno za kršćansko svjedočanstvo u post-modernom globalnom selu.*